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Butoh: From WWII To The West

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Butoh: From WWII to the West

Five men stand alone on a stage, naked except for cloth around their hips. Painted white bodies raise their arms to the sky and begin to writhe to jarring music. Agonized expressions and jarring muscular contortions radiate off the dancers, generating a fascinatingly uncomfortable experience. What I'm describing may sound like a theatre experience straight from hell, but it's one description of a butoh performance. It sits somewhere in the realm between disturbing and beautiful, nightmarish and poetic, spiritual and erotic.

Butoh, now world renowned, started as an underground dance movement in Japan that explores the human psyche in unconventional and sometimes grotesque ways. The avant-garde style originated out of the devastation of post-WWII Japan and rails against the rigidity of society as well as traditional theatre and dance forms. Hijikata Tatsumi and Kazuo Ohno founded butoh in a war-stricken country when protesters ran rampant and rigid traditionalism failed to admit the suffering of the human soul. Many influences went into the development of butoh in the late 50s and many schools of thought have branched from the original vision as the art evolves and moves West. As it has migrated, however, there is a big question about if moving westward compromises the impact of butoh's origins in postwar Japan, and if such an anti-ego art form can be anything but a detriment to western artists' sense of self?

Butoh isn't simple to define. It means different things to different artists and has evolved since its conception in 1950s Japan. As such, the style cannot be pinned down so easily by

convention. Interpretation varies by dancer, by troupe. The Butoh created by Hijikata and Ohno is not the same as what is created today, in the West or otherwise. Hijikata himself had described Butoh as “human rehabilitation,” a form for “protecting oneself from and protesting the alienation of contemporary society” (Aviv). Yet this is not all-encompassing. Akaji Maro, arguably the most acclaimed butoh actor and director ever, is of the mind that the body is moved by unseen forces, and “to capture those spirits, those gods inside our bodies, that is what butoh is all about” (Blackwood). Yoko Ashikawa, one of the first female butoh dancers, sees the style as a means of achieving the body’s ideal form of expression through contortion and discipline. Yet another interpretation, held by dance historian Juliette Crump, is that “it is the basic Buddhist value of compassion that inspires Butoh’s content and powerful expression” (Crump). While overlap may exist between these descriptions, it is clear to see just how undefinable butoh is. Some say it is better not to understand what butoh is.

After WWII, Japan was in a state of transition. The identity of Japanese culture was in disarray as Western ideals and standards intermingled with what had been uniquely Japanese. A devastating loss and economic turmoil plagued the Japanese, and amongst the horrors of war artists sought reinvention. Not wanting to blindly assimilate to Western culture at the detriment of their own, the young avant-garde circles of postwar Japan transformed with nationalistic rebellion. Many felt that “art must not be beautiful, technically skillful, or ‘comfortable.’ Instead, it should be ‘disagreeable,’ disregarding easy beauty and known forms of art” (Stein).

Hijikata Tatsumi, among this tumult, created big waves in the postwar Japanese surrealist movement when he devised the first butoh performance, “Forbidden Colors” in 1959. Influenced by German expressionism, the piece dealt with death and deformity, ignored aspects of polite Japanese society. “Forbidden Colors” explored Japanese themes while rejecting Western beauty

standards (Blackwood). At the same time, Hijikata and the modern artists of the time who followed him also turned away from traditional Japanese art forms such as noh and kabuki, instead pushing for a new contemporary style altogether. This new style, which Hijikata coined *ankoku butoh*, or “dance of darkness,” pushes the human body beyond its limitations in an effort to “erase the heavy imprint of Japan’s strict society and offer freedom of artistic expression” (Stein).

Butoh is deliberately different from traditional Japanese arts. Though there are visible similarities to noh and kabuki (i.e. dancers wearing white body paint and moving slowly) the art of butoh distinguishes itself stylistically in order to rebel against tradition and the refinement that classical Japanese art is known for. In fact, performers are encouraged to study traditional Japanese performance art so that they may break from them.

In a post-Hiroshima society, artists deliberately sought out extreme forms of emotional expression, a juxtaposition to the pride-based social norms and constraints of Japanese society. As such, butoh is often overtly sexual and uncomfortable in nature. It strives to peel back the layers of deep social conditioning and shame to what is taboo and unknown. Min Tanaka, a renowned butoh dancer, said, “behind the social face, we have many faces. [Hijikata] tried to take them off. That makes very strange movements, very strange faces.... He wanted to uncover what is hidden by ordinary society” (Tanaka).

Butoh frequently uses improvisation, which contrasts Japan’s balance and order. Chaos is welcomed, rigid conventions of modesty and structure abandoned. Especially in the 60s, it was not uncommon to see butoh artists dance naked, provoke the audience, scream alongside deafeningly loud music, and even kill animals onstage. It’s no wonder butoh artists were frequently banned and kicked out of performance venues. Instead of continuing to escape, butoh

artists strive to confront the reality of the human condition. To “explore the dark truths that hide beneath the Japanese social mask” (Stein).

As an art form originating in Japan, butoh has connections to the nation’s leading religion, Buddhism. Butoh and Buddhism both have the desire to transform the world, Buddhism by ridding the world of desire and suffering, and butoh by rejecting the world surrounding our suffering (Crump). Both admit suffering, Butoh accepting weakness and emptiness, and Buddhism striving for nirvana and peace. Buddhism tends toward “no mind” or the unperturbed mind of meditation, meanwhile Butoh is about the feeling and doing. Ultimately, both want to transform the world through changes of consciousness, whether that be meditation or dance.

With an art form so entrenched with both inspiration and rejection of Japanese society, how can butoh translate to the West? The question of *should* is already long past as butoh has become popular with American art world audiences since the 80s. Though butoh originated out of post-war Japan, it has become an international art form. Butoh troupes can be found in nearly every major city (Baird). In fact, butoh today is performed more often by non-Japanese performers than Japanese dancers (Goldberg). Butoh’s success in the West is due in part by the evolution of postmodern dance in America as well as the “Asian boom” in Western culture. The “Japanese-ness” of butoh perhaps helps Western audiences appreciate the style from an arms’ length away. They can admire the strange expressiveness and experience discomfort from a cultural distance. After all, they aren’t rebelling against Western art.

The real question is about those who want to perform butoh in Western societies. Cultural ownership and appropriation is always something one should be aware of when trying to engage with another culture’s art. And granted, the evolution of butoh as it melds with Western society is not inherently bad. But it’s hard to say what butoh becomes when it is no longer about post-war

Japan trying to find a new identity. Can Japanese butoh happen in a Western body? Nathan Montgomery, a Butoh teacher, makes the point that, “as dancers, we physically redefine ourselves through our teachers, but what’s tricky is when we take on a form that is so deeply rooted in a different cultural tradition, and the narrative is not our narrative” (Aviv). At that point should an art form be for everyone? Or just the people who created it?

Sharon Stern was a young artist who attended Naropa University, the first Buddhist-inspired university in America. She quickly fell in love with butoh after taking a class with Katsura Kan, a guest artist at Naropa and one of the world’s most prominent choreographers and instructors of butoh. Stern became devoted to the craft and to Kan as she became his student and artistic mentee, which in Japanese tradition entails a “more evolved bond” more akin to family. She was taught “butoh begins with the abandonment of self,” and fell in love with the pursuit of things beyond her own perceived arid nature (Aviv). She began to question her character (notably the Western qualities that made her bubbly and outgoing) and dim those parts to better align with Eastern notions in her search of the unknown. She embraced transformation, as her classmates put it, and studied Buddhist views of aging, disease, and death. She wanted to work on “entering the darker places of [herself], fearlessly” (Aviv).

Throughout her training, however, positive and easygoing Sharon’s change did not slow. She separated from her husband as she retreated into the work, and in pursuit of Japanese ideals, Sharon actively cast off her Western sense of identity. Her ego and individualism became roadblocks on a path to an enlightened art form, and this shedding of social structure and character was only encouraged by her *sensei*. Her family and friends began to not recognize the woman dancing topless on stage; her movements and expressions were foreign compared to how she used to perform. The cognitive dissonance Sharon experienced led to having episodes of

delusion. She even began to write in the third person as the boundaries of who the idea of “Sharon” was fell away unchecked. Stern began to exhibit signs of depersonalisation. She went on to have more than one psychotic episode where she was confused about who and where she was. Stern was prescribed antidepressants and antipsychotics, yet this did not stop her from ultimately committing suicide in 2012.

Sharon Stern’s story is a cautionary tale, but of what? One could argue it’s a warning for unhealthy mentor relationships in which the power disparity leads to a cult-like destruction. Or it could be a warning of the dangers of butoh itself. Butoh ventures into the unknown. Perhaps that is harmful in excess. But then why isn’t this story more common for butoh artists? I argue that Westerners who truly want to envelop themselves in the art of butoh are more likely to face suffering as a result of losing ties to who they are as a member of a goal-oriented, identity-oriented society.

In a recent paper in the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Jared Lindahl and Willoughby Britton document the ways meditation can lead to changes in sense of self, including the “dissolution of the personality structures that support the ‘story of me’”—an experience that many found distressing (Lindahl). One meditator told them, “It basically felt like whatever personality I thought I had before just disintegrated. And it wasn’t an expansive disintegration into unity or bliss or anything like that. It was a disintegration into dust.”

Depression and depersonalisation aren’t uncommon effects of meditation. Zen Buddhism in fact strives for such an ego-less state. Yet it’s important to gauge how the Buddhist nature of butoh and the letting go of self may be too much for a member of a Western society where individuality and ego are paramount. Mauricio Sierra-Siegert, a psychiatrist who works in the Depersonalisation Research Unit at the Institute of Psychiatry at King’s College London, has

observed that “cultural expectations appear to shape the degree to which people experience depersonalization as a source of distress” (Aviv). He discovered while moving from London to Colombia that the Colombian patients, despite having the same sense that they weren’t real, did not seem to be suffering as much as the London patients. Sierra-Siegert believes the individualistic nature of the London patients leads to more distress when there is a loss of identity. “If you feel like you are your own island—if you are entirely identified with your own story and image—then the experience of becoming depersonalized will be more threatening,” he said (Aviv).

It’s possible, especially for vulnerable people or those with a predisposition to mental health issues, that meditation can detach people from the social framework which contextualizes them within society. This can happen safely, as with Buddhism. However, if done under misguided teachings, especially as someone of a highly individualized society, the results can be disastrous, as in the case of Sharon Stern. One’s first-person perspective can entirely dissolve if not careful. People underestimate how difficult it is to change one’s culture in terms of lived experience. You can’t just decide “I am going to reform my psyche and being according to another culture’s definition” (Aviv). It turns out people are fundamentally structured around the culture they are a member of, and to try and change that is to attempt a structural upheaval.

Butoh is a complicated, messy-to-define, fascinating field of dance with a sometimes problematic history. But like with any type of art, performers of any background ought to at least understand the roots of the form and why it came to be. It may look different now, with less killing of chickens, but change is the natural course of history. To gatekeep a type of dance so that it is not appropriated would be a disservice to butoh, I think. Although it may look different in a non-Japanese context, butoh is ultimately about artistic expression. As long as it is done

safely and teachers are responsible, the wonderful and terrifying art that is butoh ought to be experienced by all.

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